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## WWII Warbird Returns to Fight Fires

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As fires blazed at many locations around Southern California, a World War II warbird returned home to fight fires. An enormous Martin Mars flying boat, designed as a US Navy maritime bomber in World War II, landed gracefully at Lake Elsinore, CA, after flying down from Canada. Owned by Coulson Flying Tankers and based at

Sproat Lake, [British Columbia](#), the Hawaii Mars was contracted by CalFire (the firefighting branch of California Department of Forestry) to begin fighting rampant wildfires in Southern California. Returning to California was like a homecoming because the Navy had operated the planes out of San Francisco about 60 years ago.

### Dreadnought

The Martin Mars was originally designed as a 'dreadnought-class' maritime bomber for the [US Navy](#). The aircraft are huge, boasting a wingspan wider than that of a 747 and they have the distinction of being the largest flying boats to ever enter production. After careful consideration of the design, the Navy concluded that the aircraft would not be able to survive anti-aircraft fire and decided to use the 6 aircraft already built in the role of transports throughout the Pacific, settling down to cargo runs between Alameda NAS and Hawaii. Although two aircraft were lost due to accidents, the four remaining aircraft performed yeoman service for many years before being put into storage at NAS Alameda in 1956, and then sold for scrap in 1959. But their story wasn't over yet.

### Canadian Rebirth

In the 1950's, a series of devastating fires in British Columbia forced Canadian logging firms to consider how best to protect their groves of trees. Faced with the fact that most firefighting aircraft of the time were inadequate to fight these sorts of fires, a Fire Protection Committee recommended acquiring the Mars from the scrapheap just in the nick of time. The planes arrived in Canada in 1959 and went to work as water bombers for Flying Tankers Incorporated in 1960. This arrangement worked well until 2007, when the planes once more went up for sale. Although many museums were interested in adding these classic warbirds to their collection, another Canadian firm ended up acquiring them and a new chapter in their story began.

### New Lease On Life

Coulson Flying Tankers was formed some months back when entrepreneur Wayne Coulson's company, The Coulson Group, acquired the two remaining Martin Mars aircraft. Wayne began casting about for new markets for his aircraft. Through the efforts of an LA-based non-profit, Wildfire Research Network, Wayne was able to begin discussions about a contract, first with San Diego, then with CalFire itself. After weeks of negotiations, and with wildfires displacing hundreds of thousands of Southern Californians, CalFire finally awarded a call-when-needed contract to Coulson Flying Tankers on 10/21/07.

### Arrival At Lake Elsinore

A convoy of red-and-white semis sporting 'Coulson Flying Tankers' and carrying equipment and support staff left British Columbia on 10/22, headed for Lake Elsinore in Riverside County, the location selected by CalFire for the Mars' base of operations. On 10/24, the Hawaii Mars departed Sproat Lake heading south. The aircraft arrived shortly after 5 PM to the cheers and applause of onlookers, some of whom were fire refugees. The aircraft circled the lake several times, then finally set down and slowly motored over to a mooring place near the boat dock, pursued by news helicopters that were filming the entire event. After a long night of work and preparation by the Coulson support crew, the aircraft lifted off from Lake Elsinore into a smoky sky early on the afternoon of 10/25 to the cheers of a growing throng of spectators. The Mars performed several scoop-and-drop operations at reduced weight (dropping only 4,000 gallons instead of the full 7,200 gallon capacity), then it was presented for inspection to CalFire Aviation head Mike Padilla as ready to begin operations.

### Once More Into The Breach

As the Mars raced off to fight wildfires, Wayne Coulson took a moment to make some comments. "We've made (gel) drops on three major fires so far (Harris, Witch, and Poomacha)", he said. "CalFire now sees us as the four acre wet blanket!" When asked about the effectiveness of the drops, Wayne said, "CalFire had been working hot spots on the Harris Fire with three helos for several hours. After the Mars dropped, Bill Payne (CalFire's Aviation Chief) said, 'Hey, the goddamned Mars knocked the whole thing out! It's gone!'" When asked to rank the plane's performance on a scale of 1 to 10, Bill replied, "Well, Wayne, you've only got downwards to go". Based on these comments, I don't think the museums should get their hopes up about adding the Mars to their collections anytime soon!

For photos and videos of the Martin Mars in action, visit [www.firebomberpublications.com](http://www.firebomberpublications.com).

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